

The Situation of Film Theory in 1968

This is an example of intellectual history in which we study not only ideas, but also the individuals and institutions that bring them into being and change along with them.

trends--a large number of people are interested in the same area, but are not in perfect agreement with each other (eg. psychoanalysis); this allows for productive difference (hopefully); antagonistic difference (possibly).

[imp. aside: remember too from first half of course, that people are also involved with this in terms of careers, competitiveness, etc.]

Individuals: it takes people for the production of ideas, articles, films, and for the interaction of this. Personal histories often intervene as well (not that that explains everything, and not that I want to just gossip about my colleagues in the field, but it needs to be understood by anyone who is going to enter the field, that it's not an area of pure disinterested scholarship (if there is such a thing).

Institutions: ideas and individuals can't exist without institutions, even informal ones. Things like film clubs, magazines, conferences, and graduate programs, are the base on which other things develop, come into being and change. Example of the Feminist and Film Reader.

There is also a personal history for individuals; theorists themselves change and develop their theoretical perspective and tools and work over time. Thus, the importance of Godard for many varying individuals can be interpreted as a "trend"--almost all the significant film theorists who form a generation of the late 60s and early 70s write about Godard. (ref. to previous lecture; film practice leads film theory, in general.)

1968: metaphor of the cross section

cross section of the upper arm of human does not indicate that the arm ends in a hand; this is the limit of such a tool for understanding, history and historical analysis lets us conclude something, so the last lecture of the course will provide another "cross section" which will make the intervening 20 years more easily understood, but it cannot be truly predictive (nor should it be)

In film criticism: dominance of "taste"

Sight and Sound, weekly and monthly reviewers (before Shalit, Siskel & Ebert, Entertainment Tonight, etc.)

a. validation of "quality" European film

b. some validation of "serious" (e.g. morally serious content) H'wood. Thus despite their antagonistic differences, Kael and Sarris are united in validating much of Hollywood, "movies" over "film"

c. the historical tradition (but, for ex., Eisenstein, not Vertov).

In film theory, dominance of a realist aesthetic

Bazin--vs. Eisenstein, vs. expressionism

Kracauer (prob. best known film th. book in Eng. at time)--same, with a different inflection both, for realist tradition, for Italian neo-realism.

What was available? what was in distribution? (US)

art house circuit: Bergman, some of the New Wave, some verite doc'y, the Italians (Dolce Vita, 8 1/2, Blow Up), some Japanese, Brit. slick realists

commercial: some changes in breakdown of studio system: e.g. Bonnie and Clyde, Easy Rider, a more marked authorship

film societies: the European tradition and major H'wood ; AudioBrandon as the norm, New Yorker and Grove as new, upstart.

U.S. avant garde: just getting started as a national phenomenon.

college courses: virtually none; "appreciation" of "classics" at best.

The full flowering of authorship

Sarris: American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-68

Authorship makes a case for taking H'wood seriously.

Decisively challenges notion of "taste."

"Not a theory" (Sarris).

Allows for the analysis of general patterns;

still has investment in a notion of "quality";

validates formal and stylistic analysis (but hides its own ideological prejudices at the same time; eg. validates Hawks and Hitchcock, but studiously avoids noticing any misogyny in them).

The rapid development of authorship (and genre, which allows for a more social reading of H'wood) has an institutional basis as well:

- the existence of movies on tv.
- the existence of re-run houses in certain urban areas
- the low cost section of 16mm dist. catalogues

An intellectual basis as well: the acceptance by a generation of young college educated people of movies as a valid art form; a subversion of the norms of the university itself. Movie going as an important cultural activity, as well as entertainment and escape. Eg, the Orson Welles in Cambridge and the exam period Bogart retro. (This was the first arrival of the tv generation on the campus; people who accepted moving sound/image material as an equal, if not yet dominant medium in relation to print.)

[aside on my own experience 64-66, 2-3 H'wood movies a day in the Navy; what you learn from extended and repeated immersion in H'wood product.]

general idea (from last quarter): film theory is decisively influenced by a shifting canon. (1) evaluation changes (2) new films become available (or old ones become re-available).

Also in 1968.

Tet Offensive; turning point in public opinion about the VN war; shows VC can strike anywhere at will; not decimated.

Johnson withdraws from election; cannot speak publically without drawing a protest demo; in last 18 months of term only visits military installations.

third long hot summer of ghetto uprisings

Expanded student movement; Columbia takeover (major SDS action)/NYC as news and print journalism center, effect in coverage

assassination of Martin Luther King as he is more involved in labor issues and after explicit anti-imperialist speaking; urban rebellions after his death.

assassination of Robert Kennedy, leading liberal contender for Democrats

growth and failure of the Gene McCarthy movement (left-liberal wing of Democratic Party.)

Chicago Democratic Convention, nominates Humphrey while police riot attack demonstrators on tv.

Election of Richard Nixon. (represents Republican middle and corporate liberal wing.)

Paris, May-June. Student-worker strike threatens DeGaulle govt; military on alert; CP breaks militancy, Maoists emerge.

It was hard to see how authorship addressed these matters.

The new Godard films:

2 or 3 Things I Know About Her (67), NY Film Festival, Oct 68.

La Chinoise (67), US 68

Weekend (67) NY Film Festival, Sept. 68

Le Gai Savoir (68),

after May-June begins intense period of militant films, collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin (Dziga Vertov Group)

Rise of the US Underground: Warhol, Chelsea Girls

The question then emerges: what would a radical political cinema be?

In theatre: the explosion of Off-Off Broadway; first move into SoHo.

In NYC sub bohemia: move into Lower East Side.

Expansion of poetry and writing, dance (Judson Dance Workshop; Rainer, Schneeman, performance art)

Overnight growth of underground newspapers

expansion of counter-culture

recreational drugs: marijuana, psychedelics

Rock music, etc.

The creation of Newsreel, the New Left documentary film organization(s)

John Hess, "Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967-80"

To summarize: there was a rapid development of a broadly constituted radical film culture; media people, just as others were influenced by this. Many barriers seemed to be falling. Art and politics; lifestyle and beliefs; activism and media.

In this context, Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969/72):

Eisenstein's aesthetics (read in 1st part of course): E as political radical and aesthetic innovator, bridging modernism and popular culture.

Authorship (Ford/Hawks) (excerpt in 1st part)

Ford's work is much richer than that of Hawks and that this is revealed by a structural analysis; it is the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford's work that makes him a great artist, beyond being simply an undoubted auteur.

(aesthetic complexity highest value; basic modernist aesthetic position) [irony: attacked in *Screen* as auteurist] Semiotics. Basic introduction. model/metaphor of language. for a more scientific analysis of aesthetic.

But also, an argument for a different history of cinema (every theory, sooner or later has to come up with a theory/model of origins)

Cinema did not only develop technically out of the magic lantern, the Daguerreotype, the phenakistoscope and similar devices--its history of Realism--but also out of strip-cartoons, Wild West shows, automatia, pulp novels, barn-storming melodramas, magic--its history of the narrative and the marvellous. Lumiere and Melies are not like Cain and Abel; there is no need for one to eliminate the other. It is quite misleading to validate one dimension of the cinema unilaterally at the expense of all the others. There is no pure cinema, grounded on a single essence, hermetically sealed from contamination.

This explains the value of a director like Jean-Luc Godard, who is unafraid to mix Hollywood with Kant and Hegel, Eisensteinian montage with Rossellinian Realism, words with images, professional actors with historical people, Lumiere with Melies, the documentary with the iconographic. More than anybody else Godard has realized the fantastic possibilities of the cinema as a medium of communication and expression.